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ABSTRACT

A review of over 1,000 student poems reveals the wide variety of forms taken by concrete poetry. Although not exhaustive, the list includes (1) figured verse, which uses poetry or poetic language to shape images; (2) letter/word images, created by the arrangement of letters of words in nonsentence form; (3) letter/word compounds, in which words shaped as letters combine to create a larger word; (4) "Poemutations," formed by varying the arrangement of letters in a word or group of words; (5) "one-words," or single words with form modifications relating to the meaning of the word; and (6) combined forms of the concrete poems suggested above. Although the quality of student-created concrete poems is by no means uniformly high, students appear to enjoy reading and writing concrete poetry and gradually grow in critical analysis skills as they talk about the poems. Concrete poetry is one of the few genres in which even very young or alienated students can take pleasure in considering the formal aspects of a literary work. (Numerous examples of student concrete poems are included.) (MM)

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How to Draw a Poem: Concrete Poetry
in the Classroom

Charles Suhor

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How To Draw A Poem:

Concrete Poetry In The Classroom

In recent years concrete poetry has grown extremely popular with students in high schools and upper elementary grades. A concrete poem catches the eye immediately, since it consists of words in some sort of visually interesting configuration. Once you stop to examine it, you're moved to figure out its often ingenious symmetry. A concrete poem can have a childish simplicity and a highly complex artistic organization at one and the same time. It calls for both intuitive and intellectual responses—something for everybody.

The term "concrete poetry" is hard to define. Some concrete poems aren't even prose, much less verse. Some are merely an arrangement of words that can't be read aloud but must be examined for the relationships between their meaning and their layout on the page.

Because of the combined graphic/verbal aspects of concrete poetry, theorists have given considerable attention to its nature and effects. A formidable body of theory has been generated by critics and poets in Europe and South America. Mary Ellen Solt's definitive volume, *Concrete Poetry* (Indiana University Press, 1968), presents much of the theory along with a wide range of concrete poems from different countries.

In this article I won't try to digest complex aesthetic credos. My goal is classroom-oriented—viz., to outline some of the basic kinds of concrete poetry that students seem to enjoy writing. In recent years I've conducted concrete poetry contests in the Greater New Orleans area in connection with a locally produced TV show, *Media Review*, and newspapers like the *Vieux Carre Courier* and *The Times Picayune*. The categories described below, then, aren't an exhaustive account of possible forms within the genre. They are derived from a review of over 1,000 student concrete poems—a dizzying but rewarding enterprise.

I. . *Figured Verse*. This has been applied to early concrete poems, like "The Altar" and "Easter Wings," written by British metaphysical poet George Herbert (1593-1633). Figured verse is one of the most complex forms of concrete poetry in that the words that create the image are in verse, or at least in sharply stated, aphoristic phrases.

WE CALL THEM
SQUARE BUT
WHAT WE MEAN
IS THAT THEIR
CORNERS ARE
DIFFERENT FROM
OURS INSTEAD
OF HELPING

WE TEND TO DROP THEM OUT

"The Square"
Jeff Ottman
Walker High School

In a sea of green
a patch of blue
a color
of such a
brilliant
hue, that
I stopped to
wonder at
the thing
a feather
lost by
a bird
on
wing the

"The Feather"
Mary Waddel
Walker High School

"Communication"
Nadine Hellmers
Nicholls High School

Nicholls High School

Walker High School

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cencencencencenf
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Walker High School

HATE
MILITANT
BIAS
RACIST
BACKLASH
HOSTILE
OTHERS
SNIPER
Y MENAGERIE
BLOOD
CAPITALISM
HIPPIE
REDNECK
ON THE
NIGGER
WHITE
BLACKS

PEACE PEACE PEACE
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Kohn Junior High School

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- IV. *Poemutations*. Poemutations are simply variations on the letters in a word or group of words—a “permutating” of the original word. “Mixed up” is a good example of a simple but effective poemutation.

“Confusion”
Glen Orazio
Peters Middle School

MIX
PMI
UPM
XUP
IXU
MIX

UP
XU
IX
MI
PM
UP

V. *One-Worders*. The one-worder is simply a single word with form modifications that relate to the meanings of the word.

"Different"

Kevin Chesnut

Marjorie Walters School

Different

"Erase"

Mike May

Marjorie Walters School

ERASE

VI. *Combined Forms*. Once in a while a student will come up with a feally clever combined form of several of the above kinds of concrete poetry. A favorite of mine is the one below, which includes type II and type I.

"Winter Scene"

Alyson King

Walker Senior High School

cloud cloud
cloud cloud cloud cloud
cloud cloud cloud cloud cloud
cloud cloud cloud cloud
cloud cloud

S N N W
O S S O W
W O W S W
N O S W N
S N O W

A soft, icy blanket of silence.

VII. *Miscellaneous*. Just to assure you again that my categories are anything but taxonomic, I include this null category. This unusual but effective concrete poem uses only numbers.

"1 - 2 Many"
Pamela Lynch
Higgins High School

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Many students, especially younger ones, like to include an actual drawing combined with words. My own bias as an English teacher is towards concrete poems in which the words themselves form the image, but some of the European and Latin American poets use colors and drawing in their works, so I suppose we can allow students the same privilege. The popular newspaper feature (carried in New Orleans in the *States-Item*) called "Wordplay" uses the drawing-cum-word approach regularly, but it also includes other forms—most often, one-words and letter/word images.

As a veteran reader of articles that promise to turn on all of your students and make them into gifted and enthusiastic poets, I'll refrain from making wild claims about the effect of concrete poetry on classroom performance and morale. Of the innumerable students' poems I've reviewed, at least half were absolutely terrible, if one applies even a moderately tough aesthetic standard.

However, no one ever said that our job is to create polished professional poets in every classroom, and teachers who have worked with the genre indicate that most kids do enjoy reading and writing concrete poetry. Furthermore, the students grow in critical analysis skills as they talk about the poems. They can distinguish the really clever ones from those which are quite bland—for example, a chair made up of a stringing together of the word "chair" seventy-five times.

A concrete poem engages the students as a puzzle does. It is one of the few genres in which even the very young and tuned-out students can take pleasure in considering the formal aspects of a literary work. Students who aren't interested in the meter and rhyme of a Shakespearean sonnet will often make very astute observations about why it's appropriate for the letters in the word "cloud" in the Alyson King poem to be organized in proper sequence, while the word "snow" in the same poem is scattered about, and the sentence at the bottom is set out in its natural form with a slightly hill-like shape.

Let me close with a word from my sponsor. The two concrete poetry contests mentioned earlier resulted in videotapes, a film, and a slide show on concrete poetry—all funded by the Louisiana Council for Music and the Performing Arts. All are available for loan on request through the Supervisor of English, New Orleans Public School, 731 St. Charles Avenue, New Orleans, LA 70130. The videotape is a 2" tape suitable for use at TV stations rather than school VTR sets. The film, taken from the videotape, will play on any 16mm projector. The slides comes with a brief teachers' guide geared towards stimulating class discussion. Since all of the works are by students, you shouldn't have a hard time convincing your own students that they, too, can do a bit of graphic/verbal spelunking and learn how to draw a poem.